

Senior Concert 2017

Senior Distinction Project

Tess Gilbert

INTRODUCTION

In spring of 2015, a very excited second semester sophomore sprouted the idea of planning a concert for her peers as her senior project. She contacted the incoming Chair of The Ohio State University Department of Dance, Susan Hadley, to ask if a senior concert would be possible. I was that very excited sophomore. Over the next two years, I planned and implemented a concert for eleven of my peers. I had two overarching goals in producing the 2017 Senior Concert: these included to articulate a common practice for producing dance in a collegiate setting and to make connections between these practices and the professional world. To inform these goals, I conducted interviews with Chuck Helm, Director of Performing Arts at the Wexner Center for the Arts, Bebe Miller, Artistic Director of the Bebe Miller Company and Professor at The Ohio State University Department of Dance, and Benny Simon, a PHD student in the dance department who owned a digital ad agency, 360i, and belonged to the faculty of Gibney Dance.

When I asked Chuck Helm what he finds rewarding about producing dance, he responded, “to see the excitement in people like yourself, the faculty, and audiences- that’s everything as far as I’m concerned.” This quote, paired with my own passion for bringing people together around dance, became the driving force for the 2017 Senior Concert. To embark on this project, I conducted research through: developing connections with my peers, planning a concert workshop, public relations for the concert, front of house management, and show week organization. I anticipate that my experience in these areas and the activities surrounding them in turn will directly benefit my future professional work as an event planner.

BEGINNING STEPS

After deciding that I would be planning a Senior Concert, I scheduled a meeting with my classmates to see who would like to be involved. Initially, my peers voiced a great interest in the Senior Concert, which would have resulted in a three hour long show. I anticipated high involvement, but this large quantity of interest exceeded my expectations. Thankfully, as time went on and people began clearly articulate their projects, some realized they did not want to produce in a traditional space and left the concert. By the end of spring semester 2016, I identified the participating seniors as well as the stage managers and lighting designers. I met with Susan Hadley, Dave Covey, and Carrie Cox to decide the concert date and discuss what an extra concert meant for the department. When I interviewed Benny Simon, he discussed the seasons at Gibney Dance. He explained that before they started any project they would analyze the potential production to see if they had the resources and skills necessary to produce. This perspective greatly influenced the early planning stages.

DEVELOPING CONNECTIONS

Many crucial relationships developed throughout the process of planning the Senior Concert. I formed an important relationship with Carrie Cox, the Production Manager in the Department of Dance. Starting in fall of 2016, Carrie and I met consistently and discussed all aspects of the concert and future steps I needed to take to reach my goal. Through my relationship with Carrie, I learned how the department typically managed concerts. Carrie would listen to all of my questions, challenge me with more questions, and send me reminders of things I could be missing.

First, Carrie and I worked on selecting the production crew for the Senior Concert. Prior to planning this concert, I had little to no experience with dance production or working as a crew

member for a show. Thankfully, I took production from Carrie my freshman year and kept all of my notes. As a result, before our first meeting, I scoured over them in an attempt to remember what I learned three years previous. I did not realize, before starting this project, the level of difficulty in organizing volunteers. I faced the challenge of getting the three lighting designers in the same place at the same time. I believe this was difficult because they did not see the concert as their first priority due to it being many months away. Over the course of the fall semester I evenly distributed the lighting designers and stage managers to different choreographers and Carrie helped me explain to my peers what we expected of them.

Carrie also helped me understand the technical elements of a show. We created an overarching tech schedule and considered specific challenges that production entails. As the first step, I asked the choreographers to fill out a production questionnaire. When most of the choreographers left the questionnaires blank, I realized they were not far enough into their choreographic processes to answer the questions. As time went on and choreographers progressed, Carrie and I began to learn about complicated tech elements in the Senior Concert, including a live musician, water onstage, and wood boards for a tap dance number. I worked with each choreographer, Carrie, and the department to address these issues to ensure a smoothly running show.

CONCERT WORKSHOP

In spring of 2016 my advisor, Dave Covey, suggested that I run a concert workshop for the senior choreographers to attend each week in preparation for the concert. In this concert workshop, the eleven seniors both shared their own work and gave feedback on each other's work. Dave put MFA Candidate, Joshua Manculich, in charge of the workshop. In the fall

semester, I frequently worried about how the concert workshop would come to pass. In my time at Ohio State, I have never produced work in a department concert; therefore, I had minimal experience in a concert workshop. Josh and I worked together to form a showing schedule for the eleven choreographers that covered the seven weeks in spring semester before the concert.

In an attempt to run a successful feedback session, Josh began to work with the class on Liz Lerman's four step feedback process. Though initially successful, as time progressed, the choreographers lost commitment to the 4 step process and desired a more casual feedback method. Over time, between Josh's personal schedule, and response from participants, Dave Covey began to run the class. With Dave, I set a twenty minute timer and each student could use the time as they pleased, showing their work, and asking questions. This system could be easily altered according to what each choreographer needed, making it very effective.

I had weekly interaction with the people participating in the concert through the workshop, making it my main source of contact. Therefore, each week I would announce information concerning the concert and remind people of important upcoming deadlines they had to meet such as costume showings, blurbs for the program, and turning in sound files. I also used this time to understand their opinions on things such as the Lantern article and an opening speech at the beginning of the concert. Along with these announcements I also made multiple handouts and sent weekly reminder emails.

Concert workshop had both successes and challenges. Once the workshop found a groove, students came ready to perform and willing to give each other thoughtful feedback. Hosting this concert workshop as part of the process proved to be a huge success in the final week of the production. Participants felt personally invested in each other's work, leading them to act as a team during show week. Through reflecting on this process, I connect this teamwork

to the sense of “ownership” Bebe Miller feels has kept her collaborators together for the last 19 years. Bebe believes that her company finds the most success when she and the dancers work together to figure out what a piece needs rather than when she takes charge and places herself above her dancers.

NAVIGATING RELATIONSHIPS

My experience managing individuals in events preceding the senior concert included managing coworkers or strangers but never my peers. I found it difficult to learn how to properly relate to my peers throughout this process. Due to my personal relationships with the eleven students, I found it challenging to gain their respect as a leader. Their lack of respect fostered laziness and lack of dedication. Each choreographer had to take the process seriously and benefit from it as much as they saw fit. I blame forced involvement in the concert workshop and other parts of the production process with no concrete reward such as a grade.

Specific problems I encountered in preparation for the concert included people not coming to the class and not reading my emails. This resulted in people consistently missing deadlines and feeling as though I had not given enough of an opportunity to show their work. At the beginning of the concert workshop, the choreographers had such a small level of commitment, I had to cancel a workshop and rearrange the entire showing schedule. Though people became more dedicated to the process and more attentive to each other’s work over time, they would often force me to follow up with them multiple times to get what I needed for deadlines set by the department.

Through my interview process I learned that when Chuck Helm produces a show, he sets up mutual expectations with the company before they begin. The Senior Concert did not accomplish this. Though by the end, I had gained the participants respect and they gave me a

gift, I found the middle part of the process incredibly difficult. Looking back, I should have set up a contract that clearly stated the expectations of the workshop, meeting deadlines, and expectations of their attendance to the workshop and other rehearsals.

PUBLIC RELATIONS

Public relations consumed more time than any other aspect of the Senior Concert. In an attempt to be on top of my game, I had contacted Dori Jenks, the External Relations Coordinator for the department in the summer of 2016. After she didn't respond, I learned in the fall that she had left the position and a woman named Lindsay Ferguson had just started. Once I finally got in contact with Lindsay just before winter break, I learned she was leaving the position as well. Thankfully, on her last day, Lindsay sent me an email giving me a brief overview of everything that needed to happen for the public relations portion of the Senior Concert. When I returned from break in January, I did my best to begin the poster, press release, social media posts, and program on my own. As the concert approached, Damien Bowerman accepted the position of External Relations Coordinator and proved to be a huge help to me in wrapping up all of the loose ends before the concert opened.

For my first PR task, I tackled the poster making process. I had minimal experience marketing events prior to this. I started off by asking Lilianna Kane to come in and photograph a concert workshop in order to have images to use for marketing. Finding an image that represented the concert as a whole proved to be a tremendous challenge. Once we had chosen the image, I began the process of using InDesign to create the poster. I had no experience with this program, nor did the people in the department whom I had sought out for help. I had many challenges with proper formatting and image size that Damien he helped me tackle. Once we completed the poster design, we sent it to the department staff for approval and printing. Benny

Simon encouraged me to work with the 11 participants as my first collaborators and use their personal networks as ways to reach more people with word about the concert. Because of this, I asked for their feedback on the most effective places to hang posters and I set out to strategically disperse the posters around campus.

I tackled the press release next. I gathered the blurbs from the choreographers, a tedious challenge, which required me to follow up with almost half of the participants after they didn't meet the deadline. Once I had gathered all of the blurbs, I put them in the template that I had been given for a Dance Department press release. When I sent this to Deb Singer and Susan Hadley for approval, they informed me of mistakes that needed to be fixed by Damien when he started. Damien completely reformatted the press release and sent it to the College of Arts and Sciences. This upset the choreographers, as their blurbs had been shortened or changed in the new version of the press release. Many came to me with many complaints. All the same, I found it a very good depiction of the Senior Concert for the public eye and ensured my classmates I would use their versions of the blurbs in social media posts.

The social media advertising that I did for the show included a Facebook page, a Facebook event, and Instagram posts. I also contacted Maggie Ferrell and she worked with Damien to post on the official OSU Dance accounts. Benny encouraged me to gather as much material for social media as possible in order to generate community interest in the event. I attempted to do this by constantly asking for content from the 11 choreographers and their dancers. Though I did not have as much content as I would have liked, I consistently posted photos and blurbs about pieces on social media in the weeks leading up to the concert.

FRONT OF HOUSE MANAGEMENT

On the first day of the concert workshop, I asked my peers if any of them would be interested in helping with front of house activities or the programs for the concert. Callie Lacisnki and Kylee Smith both expressed interest. I sent them a program template and they got to work gathering material. Again, we had quite a hard time getting information from choreographers. Once we did and we placed all of the information in the template, we sent it to the department faculty for approval. We received many helpful forms of feedback. Kylee and Callie edited the programs, and the helpful OSU Dance office assistants printed and folded them.

Front of house management included multiple steps that did not demand as much of my involvement. These included the working with the ticket office, front of house management on show nights, and video documentation. When interviewed, Bebe Miller spoke on the strength of her team and how the final product of her pieces relies greatly on the skills and gifts of the people that she works with. In each one of these steps, I had assistance from a skilled person to accomplish the task at hand. Damien Bowerman and Chris Cogell conducted front of house management, Chris Sommers, Lexi Stilianos, and Mitchell Rose managed the video documentation, and Damien Bowerman and Deb worked with the ticket office.

SHOW WEEK

Just when we had finished all of the preparatory steps for the concert, tech week began. The crew for the Senior Concert included Carrie Cox, Dave Covey, Oded Huberman, four freshman production students, four senior lighting designers, and the three senior stage managers. This crew worked incredibly hard in multiple kinds of rehearsals including lighting rehearsals, an act one tech, an act two tech, and a dress rehearsal. In the lighting rehearsals, lighting designers worked with their assigned choreographers and casts to set the lighting and

ensure proper stage managing procedures. We ran into problems like the exhaustion of lighting designers after two days of very long rehearsals. Not only that, in act one, one of the lighting designers did not show up for rehearsal, forcing the stage manager to call the piece with very little direction.

Throughout the week, I took the responsibility of making sure things ran on schedule and worked to troubleshoot any problems. This included the management of the many props being used throughout the show and organizing choreographers and their casts. On the day of act one tech, a dancer could not come during their allotted time so I spent the entire day trying to rearrange the rehearsal order to accommodate the dancer. For my last big task, I had to address how to pull the audience's attention into the concert. When I spoke with Bebe Miller she suggested that I should work to shape the beginning of the concert and the end of intermission. Per Carrie Cox's suggestion, we organized a welcome message to the audience at the beginning of the concert. We also shaped the end of intermission by having the tap piece begin to warm up on the stage while the house lights were still up.

After a successful dress rehearsal, we opened the show on Thursday March 2nd and ran through Saturday March 4th. When the show began I could really see the teamwork take hold within the participants. They helped each other clean up onstage and move props, congratulated each other when things went well, and consoled each other when things went wrong. As I could see the team start to come together, I began to see all of my hard work fall into place as well. Once the concert run began, my checklists had been mostly completed; I only introduced the concert, shuffled props, and performed in Heidi Murr's piece. It fascinated me to see all of the aspects of the concert come together and also to know that my dream from two years earlier had become a reality.

FINAL REFLECTION AND FUTURE STEPS

I anticipate that my involvement in this concert will directly relate to what I will be doing upon leaving The Ohio State University. I have accepted a position at the Whetstone Conference and Event Center in Louisville, Ohio, as their Director of Events. In holding this position, I am expected to manage day to day facility operations of the event center, event sales, and run advertising campaigns and social media accounts. I officially started this position in January 2017 working remotely and have already begun to see connections between what I am doing and what I learned in the Senior Concert.

Through planning this concert I have learned many new organizational strategies. I learned applicable real world skills like how to use InDesign, create a press release, and run social media accounts. I also learned to think strategically about how to gain people's interest around a subject when advertising. In general, I feel my problem solving skills have gotten much stronger throughout this process.

Throughout this process I had the opportunity to work with my professors, my peers, and people within the university at large. In doing this, I have learned a lot about how I handle relationships in difficult situations. In the future I will ensure constant communication and demand respect. I will work to lead with clarity and patience. I also have learned a lot about myself. This process has helped me raise my expectations for myself and given me a better idea of my capabilities. Not only that, it has made me more excited for the challenges and successes to come. Though no direct correlation can be easily found between dance and events, I believe that Bebe Miller put it best when she said that "organizing an event is in its own way organizing time, space, and energy," we do this every day in dance.